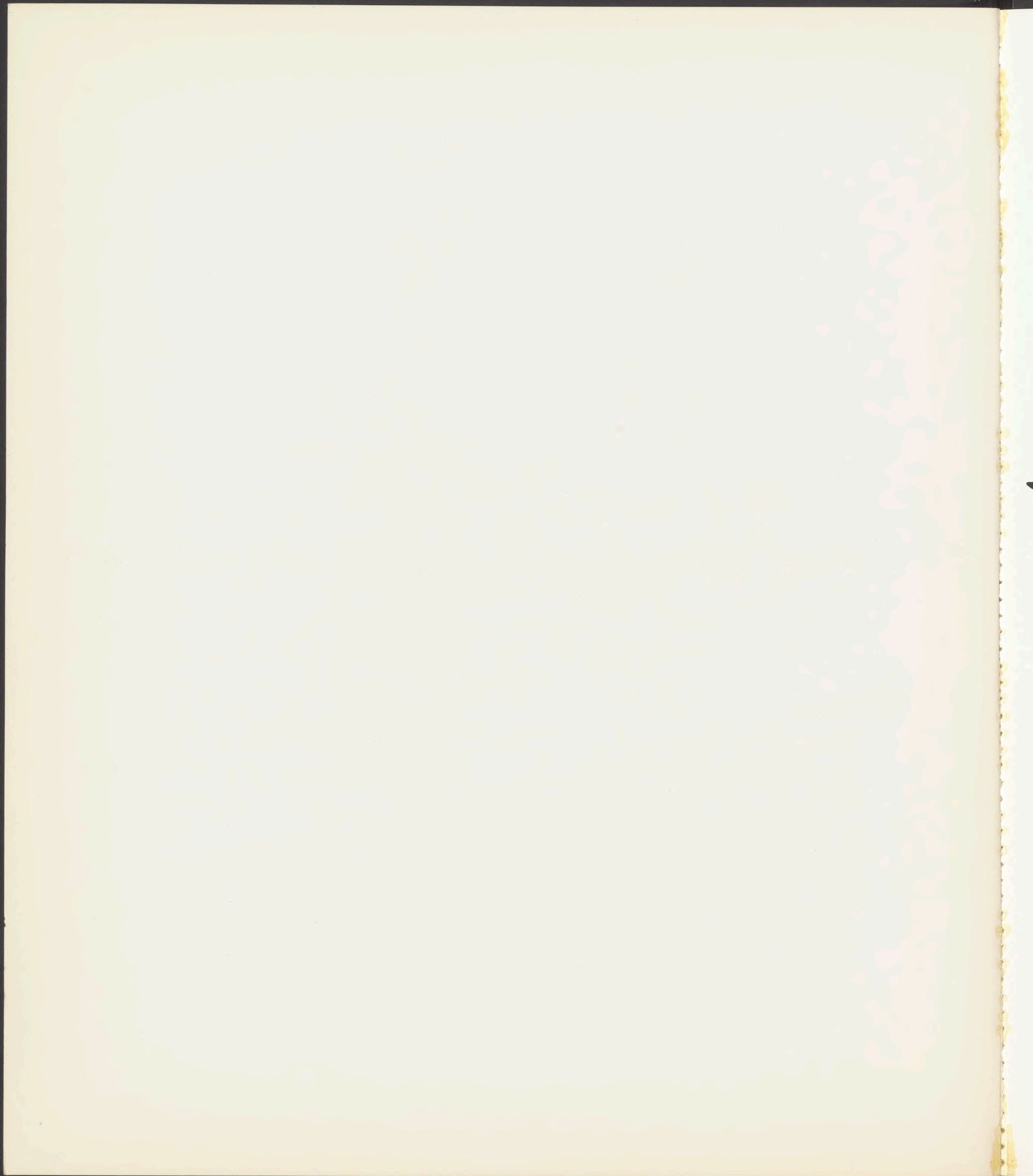


Frederick Sommer



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53 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1977



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FREDERICK SOMMER
AT SEVENTY-FIVE
A RETROSPECTIVE

Edited by Constance W. Glenn and Jane K. Bledsoe

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is an extraordinary state of affairs when a man so respected by his peers, and in the arena of his endeavor, is so little known to his greater public. Our intent with this exhibition and catalogue is to rectify that situation, and in so doing, honor Frederick Sommer on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday. A warm but shy, retiring and classically cultured man, he has held himself away from the center of the flowering of photography; absorbed, as he has been for half a century, in a pursuit of excellence measured by his own most private and critical standard. Neither his work, nor his poetry which accompanies it here, is easy. One does not presume he would wish it so. The images which often have such seemingly repugnant content beyond their seductive surfaces, give up their full range of pleasures grudgingly for some, while for others there is instant attunement. Therefore we have not only selected each specific work with a myriad of considerations in mind, we have also gone to a number of varied sources for assistance in placing Frederick Sommer's work in what we hope is the best possible context. An essay by Exhibition Curator Leland Rice, who has devoted almost two years to this project, often at the expense of his own work; an especially sensitive interpretation of *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John* by Jan-Gunnar Sjölin, never before printed in English; an extensive bibliography by Terence Pitts and survey of video tapes by Timothy Druckrey, of the Center for Creative Photography; selections from Sommer's own *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics*, privately published and not generally available; and an exhaustive catalogue, by Jane Bledsoe, with precise size, title and date corrections and revisions, in the interests of

scholarship, accompany the images. I am deeply indebted to each of these talented collaborators. James Enyeart, Director of the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona at Tucson, has offered support, assistance and advice from the beginning—without which the project would not have been possible. Among the many others who have contributed immeasurably are: Thomas Carabasi, assistant to Frederick Sommer; Susan Kismaric, Assistant Curator of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art; Sara Campbell, Curator of Exhibitions, The Norton Simon Museum; David Travis, Curator of Photography, The Art Institute of Chicago; Peter McGill, Light Gallery, New York; Robin Grace; Ada M. Fung; John Weiss; Lucinda Gedeon, Linda Thau, the CSULB Associated Students, and the members of The Art Museum and Galleries' dedicated staff.

Our largest measure of gratitude is due the lenders whose names appear in the catalogue. They have each been generous beyond our best hopes. They are the crux of the exhibition and we offer them heartfelt thanks, as we do the National Endowment for the Arts for very generous support of the exhibition and catalogue.

Finally, Frederick Sommer has given of his time, his energy, his concern and his knowledge unstintingly. We sincerely hope our efforts do him honor.

**Constance W. Glenn, Director
The Art Museum and Galleries**



INTRODUCTION

Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five brings together a collection of images from the past forty years which reveals the artist's private sources of inspiration as "linkages" to the universe we all share. Through his vision and perception, a hidden world is made visible. Upon confronting these images we find ourselves caught up in a compelling moment of recognition, forced to recall our collective past. He stretches the limits of our consciousness and takes us to the edges of believability through images sometimes drenched with primordial meaning, sometimes drained of life. Henry Holmes Smith pinpoints a number of continuing currents which shape Sommer's photographic philosophy:

In a world of disturbing images, the general body of photography is bland, dealing complacently with nature and treating our perceptions as insights. Strange, private worlds rarely slip past our guard from this quarter... Sommer has elected to show us some things we may have overlooked... Without affectation, that is, directly, Sommer charges an ironic or absurd artifact with the force of an ancient idea that lies deeply hidden and nearly forgotten in everybody.¹

Central to Sommer's methodology is the reiteration of ideas through words and pictures. He approaches these components, words and pictures, as existing mutually bonded, and refers to them as linguistic and pictorial logic. He views art as "man's oldest repository of visual structure and language as the vessel that holds pictorial logic."² The structure of language and the structure of visual images are isomorphic. Everything is connected, and forms and patterns of behavior in one set of occurrences have an equivalency in another.³ This exhibition

focuses on the unique contribution of the artist by presenting selections from his earliest efforts to the present in the three major graphic media he has explored: drawings, photographs, and musical scores.

Sommer's lifelong preoccupation has been art, and it is "the thing that is most familiar to him."⁴ His artistic character began to form quite naturally during his childhood. He recounts from this period:

Art and music were simply things that belonged in life like anything else, like the facts of having to earn a living were a part of it.⁵

His parents had lived for many years in the Mediterranean area where there was an intuitive acceptance of natural phenomena. After the family moved to Brazil, where he was continually surrounded by nature's "remarkable specimens," Sommer indicates that he developed "a certain lusciousness of feeling." His father, a landscape architect, introduced him to architecture, the design discipline which would provide him with principles he would employ, as an adult, in painting, drawing, and eventually photography.

In 1935, shortly after settling in Arizona, he packed a case of drawings and traveled to New York where he sought out Alfred Stieglitz. Even though Stieglitz was many years his senior, the two had much in common. Sommer's practical knowledge of architecture and his thorough study of the Italian Renaissance, coupled with Stieglitz' awareness of European intellectual life and currents in modern art, acted to provide them with a fertile atmosphere for the sharing of ideas. Stieglitz' leadership and accomplishments in photography were

not lost on Sommer, but it was the exposure to the work and ideas of the artists shown at Stieglitz' gallery, *An American Place*, which consumed his interest and fueled his growing need for contact with modern artists (i.e., Arthur Dove, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe).

This was essentially the reason I was aware of Stieglitz. I could see that he was someone who was not interested in just a certain aspect of something he was dealing with. But he was interested in total awareness... And conviction. Absolute conviction. This man never spoke of things he hadn't done.

That "lusciousness of feeling" Sommer had experienced as a boy in Brazil returned once again when he saw, for the first time in 1936, the photographs of Edward Weston. Although he had been inspired by the work of Paul Strand, Sommer had never before perceived such a strong feeling for the cohesion and eloquence of the print's surface as he did in Weston's work. The "decisive and sensuous use of the tone scale" on Weston's photographic surface amazed him and he recognized that it would have "an impact new to art."⁶ This realization helped to focus the young photographer's attention on how the final image composed of the subject's grays and blacks and light and shadow could most effectively be deposited on the sensitized surface, which continues today to be a primary consideration in his work:

It is with sensitized surfaces, rather than with photography itself that I am concerned. The sensitized surface has an honesty, an inevitableness; it just can't do anything else. It shows you what some process showed to it... And the sensitized surface in this case is really the great denominator, not the fact that you used the camera.⁷

His introduction to Weston's work intensified Sommer's awareness of the need to use the most precise tools possible, and in late 1938 he bought an eight by ten inch view camera which he would use to produce the majority of his photographic images. He had learned from the study of architecture that a layout acted as a "map" delineating the structure which would materialize from the positioning of objects, and that the visibility provided by the large format camera allowed comparable planning of the photographic image.

In 1940 Sommer traveled again to New York where he met another pioneering image maker, Charles Sheeler. Although Sheeler was equally accomplished in both painting and photography, he had gained his major

reputation in the former. Sommer was most impressed with the sense of economy in his imagery. "What I noticed was the great economy and the rigor and precision of the way they were done and yet, I feel, they were very lyrical." Finally, Stieglitz, Weston, and Sheeler—foremost among America's modern artists—prompted his observation that:

...these people were everything America was not. I remember in 1925, as I look back, the mood of America as a whole was quite wonderful, sleeping a certain way but very active in its sleep. There were some very outstanding people... But as time went on, and things began to change rather fast, then people like Stieglitz, Weston, and Sheeler became more and more outstanding because they were sticking to their thing... They were all very simple in their own way. Stieglitz had a simplicity in terms of his complexity and Weston lived what people called a very primitive life, could live on a few vegetables and do it elegantly and Sheeler was in a different position because he was in New York and in a sense was working for a market. And, yet, the way in which his house, which was very beautifully furnished with Shaker furniture, the way everything was arranged was very simple and direct. So here were these people who were amazingly similar.

***When the world was young images were strong.*⁸**

Sommer may well have observed that the lives of the three artists whom he so admired stood in relief against the background of an unique and vital period in the development of American art. Every era in the history of human culture develops its own concepts of space (time and distance). These spatial concepts tend to dominate life and are altered only when new discoveries, materials or constructions force updating. The development of art movements in the twentieth century can be viewed in this context. New concepts place demands on long-held spatial dictums and directly affect their application. Because the invention of photography proved valuable for visually articulating space, the application of this descriptive recorder coupled with the inquisitive vision of Frederick Sommer has produced a series of evocative and significant photographs.

The earliest photographs in this exhibition have a distinct objectivity and an outright matter-of-factness. Images of chicken embryos, coyote carcasses or the

sun-dried and bleached hide of a horse, are indeed disquieting. But these pictures are not just filled with the "poetry of decay." They burst forth as powerfully endowed with the conjunction of captured moments of life transformed by the absolutely "right" instrument of revelation, the camera. Sommer exercised a quality of vision in recording this environment that extends far beyond the immediate reality of the camera's stare. At the time he embarked upon this body of work he was just beginning to grasp the means to achieve the most effective spatial distribution of the objects across the flat picture plane. "Our fundamental empathy is to the structure that content reveals."⁹ Content, therefore, is intended to reveal structure, and structure to act as a map, indicating ways to look at a picture. In the 1939 images of chicken parts Sommer risked being overwhelmed by the material to such an extent that his organization of the space in the photographs lacked a degree of structural cohesiveness. The later images from this same body of work, *Horse*, 1945 (cat. no. 7) and *Coyotes*, 1945 (cat. no. 8), display a structural complexity which creates a tension between the severe immediacy of the object photographed and the subterranean rendering of the subject matter. Parts of the carcass of the horse appear smashed into the earth while the camera lens depicts, with foreground emphasis, the frontal pair of legs as astonishingly fully shaped, outlined effectively by deep, black shadow. The use of a short lens in combination with a close-up vantage point accounts for much of the image's impact; but it is the way the subject grabs and clutches at the surface of the photographic print that so abruptly imprints this image on our memory. The fact that these images were made from the late thirties through the mid-forties, places them in a critical social framework. Sommer has wondered how people could make an issue of the horror of his work when the world was involved in the most barbarous conflict ever known:

...how could anybody think that anything I could do with a camera could in any way annoy anybody's finer feelings, when they were giving consent to warfare on a scale unprecedented? I can't answer it... Those things exist and you might say this was homage to existence as it is.

Sommer has come to view the photograph not as a "moment of truth, but as truth before the fact."¹⁰ He believes that when photographing you are faced with accepting or rejecting a complex set of circumstances which challenges your ability to fully understand why you take the photograph in the first place. He therefore

feels there is no reason to take the photograph except for the margin of the unstated because:

You hope to be able to come back to it—re-graze over it—and find a wider statement. You do it for the degree of accommodation that is not completed within it. Things don't fit together and thereby cancel each other out.¹¹

We cultivate our ability to perceive an image which we find unsettling by taking time to view it again. Through focusing on it with another set of senses a greater understanding can materialize unencumbered by convenient conclusions. Sommer's attitude is that photography provides us the opportunity to view the world and imagine it at the same time.

Life is the longest 45 minutes close to nature. Some speak of a return to nature, I wonder where they could have been.¹²

In discussing the landscape photographs, it is critical to note the precise acceptance of nature, and of the objectivity of the field of vision as subject matter. Landscape as subject for the camera stands aside and "exists for itself" despite ongoing attempts, throughout the history of art, to make images about it. In the Arizona landscape Sommer saw no possibility for a rendering in the tradition of classical landscapes associated with certain predictable moods and mannerisms. This harsh terrain seemed to have "no atmosphere that would amount to anything, it was practically a lunar landscape."

For years I looked at the Arizona landscape and it seemed almost a hopeless task... There wasn't anything worth featuring, nothing worth making a to-do about. It was just like a situation where everybody was in trouble. All those plants were dry and dead and dying. And, if they weren't, you could take them as a whole, in their totality. This took a little time. So I set up the camera along the desert rocks, I set up twice and I looked at it and I said, 'Yes, that's the way it should be.' And I said, 'This is crazy, it doesn't make any sense.' ... It took three times of setting up before I photographed the thing... What was the difference between the top of the picture and the bottom of it? It was all the same. But there was a difference. The only thing is that it was more subtle.

...there's a great deal going on. Maybe this helped me to realize that I was also looking at details. These were enormous areas, but still there were







details... There's nothing happening in the sky and I decided, 'No skies for me.' Finally, there was no foreground, there was no middle distance, there was nothing. And, there was very little distinction between the plants and the rocks. Even the rocks were struggling.

The problems Sommer enumerates were resolved when the artist looked to nature itself to suggest its own order.

The world of art and the world of science are interested in evidence and verification. They do not live off hearsay. You never see artists really. You see only art, if you see anything. Nature respects only evidence.¹³

I think this takes us to the very nature of photography. Perhaps the most peculiar and most distinguishing characteristic is that you can never photograph a thing. What you're essentially photographing is how it related to a great many other things. So it seems like photography was environmental long before the word got to be a fetish. And it can't be anything else.

These desert landscapes fit uncomfortably, if at all, within accepted conventions of landscape photography for, although they are packed with abundant descriptive power equivalent to the images of the earlier 19th century expeditionary photographers, they are not harnessed to factual depiction for analytical study of the topography of the area. Nor are they like the idyllic photographs associated with the work of an Ansel Adams that celebrate the splendor of the western terrain. Rather, Sommer's landscapes deal with the

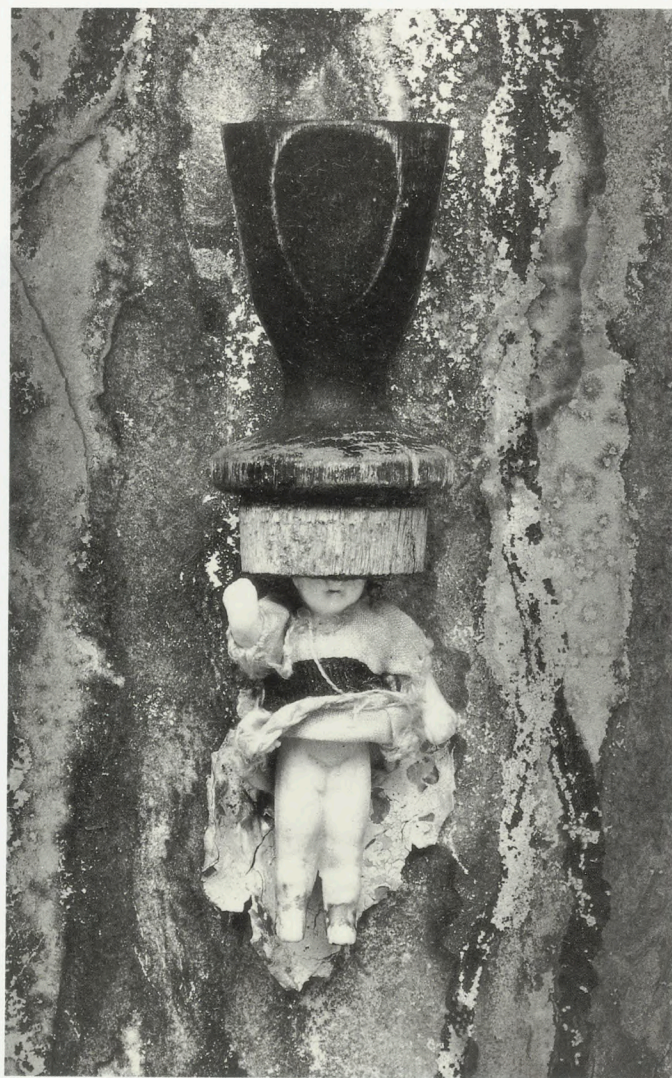
"bare bones" look of the desert, its surprises, the irregularities of foliage growth, the fecundity of natural geometric forms. We tend to take the landscape itself for granted but in this work the images of it are as consciously constructed as a building. When these photographs were made few artists had intervened to shape our perception of such topography. So, it remained for Sommer to expressively present it as a horizonless scene, packed edge-to-edge with an overall, decentralized distribution of detail. It is significant to note that these landscape images predate both the skein paintings of Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey's white writing pieces. Coincidence, once again, dictated the occurrence of overlapping concerns and, Sommer notes:

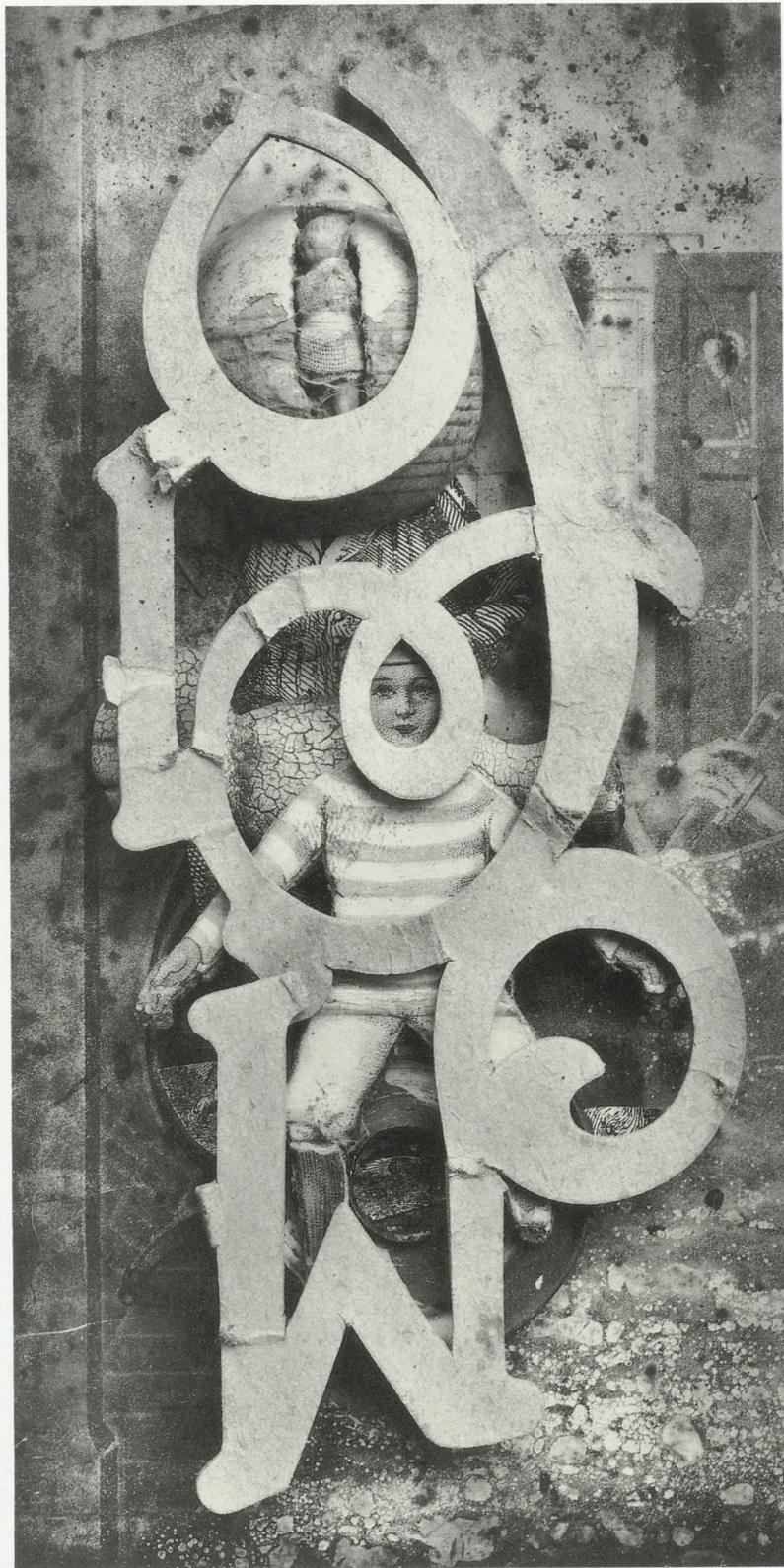
What is the importance of Duchamp, if not to tell us that the things that go on in painting can be done without painting.¹⁴

It is the time you spend setting up and considering the scene that is the art of photographing; it's really of very small consequence whether you press the button or not.¹⁵

Sommer pursued photography because it allowed him to explore the same problems which he recognized as components of drawing and painting. Initially, it was the complete objectivity of the camera that occupied him—taking photographs of nature as it was. His art developed further when he began to work with "found objects" which he assembled into configurations for the camera:

I know that photography has a way of handling some things well and I make more of these available than I could find in nature. If I could find them





in nature, I would photograph them. I make them because through photography I have a knowledge of things that can't be found.¹⁶

In the assembling of the collages, Sommer feels the range of complex relationships is substantially increased, not only by the veracity of the camera's image but by the manner in which the medium shapes the look of things. Because the photograph represents a potentially "bigger package" accommodating more of our feelings, our desires, opening up more territory to think about, he believes it is the optimum medium through which to make visible these relationships. He sometimes studies the collected piles of weathered discards, billboard scraps, or dismembered children's toys for years. He does not confine himself to the single fragment but waits until he observes a number of interrelating forms which can be joined together, often keeping a variety of items out on a table for months at a time. When a combination does manifest itself most of the objects are not pasted together but rather just laid out and photographed, allowing him to re-use certain items again in other combinations. The titles that Sommer gives to the photographs of collages are, at times, like small, metaphorical poems which evocatively enlarge the themes. The subtle relationships of titles to imagery reveal his playful wit. In coining them he creates, from a linguistic standpoint, new conjunctions of old words. Such titles as *All Children are Ambassadors*, *The Thief Greater than his Loot*, and *The Circumnavigation of the Blood* are rich in invention and often offer further opportunities to "read" the images.

Sommer's images were reproduced in *Aperture* in 1956, 1957, 1960, and 1961. In 1962 *Aperture* published a comprehensive collection of thirty photographs dating from 1939 to 1962 which was sequenced with an accompanying text of poetic meditation by the artist. Minor White, the editor and founding force behind the publication, believed that a photograph could be "read," and therefore shared the poet's belief that, "words could make one see more clearly." In a recent article discussing the impact of *Aperture* on photography in the 1950's, Jonathan Green noted:

The most fitting photograph to be "read" was a visual *koan*; a photograph that provided almost no information, that asked more than it answered, an enigma that forced the viewer to exhaust and abandon the analytic intellect in favor of intuition

and direct experience... It remained for Frederick Sommer to contribute those photographs that were the most eminently open to scrutiny.¹⁷

In addition to the reproductions of Sommer's images, there were often comments by students affiliated with White or by photography educators. White himself wrote in a 1956 issue:

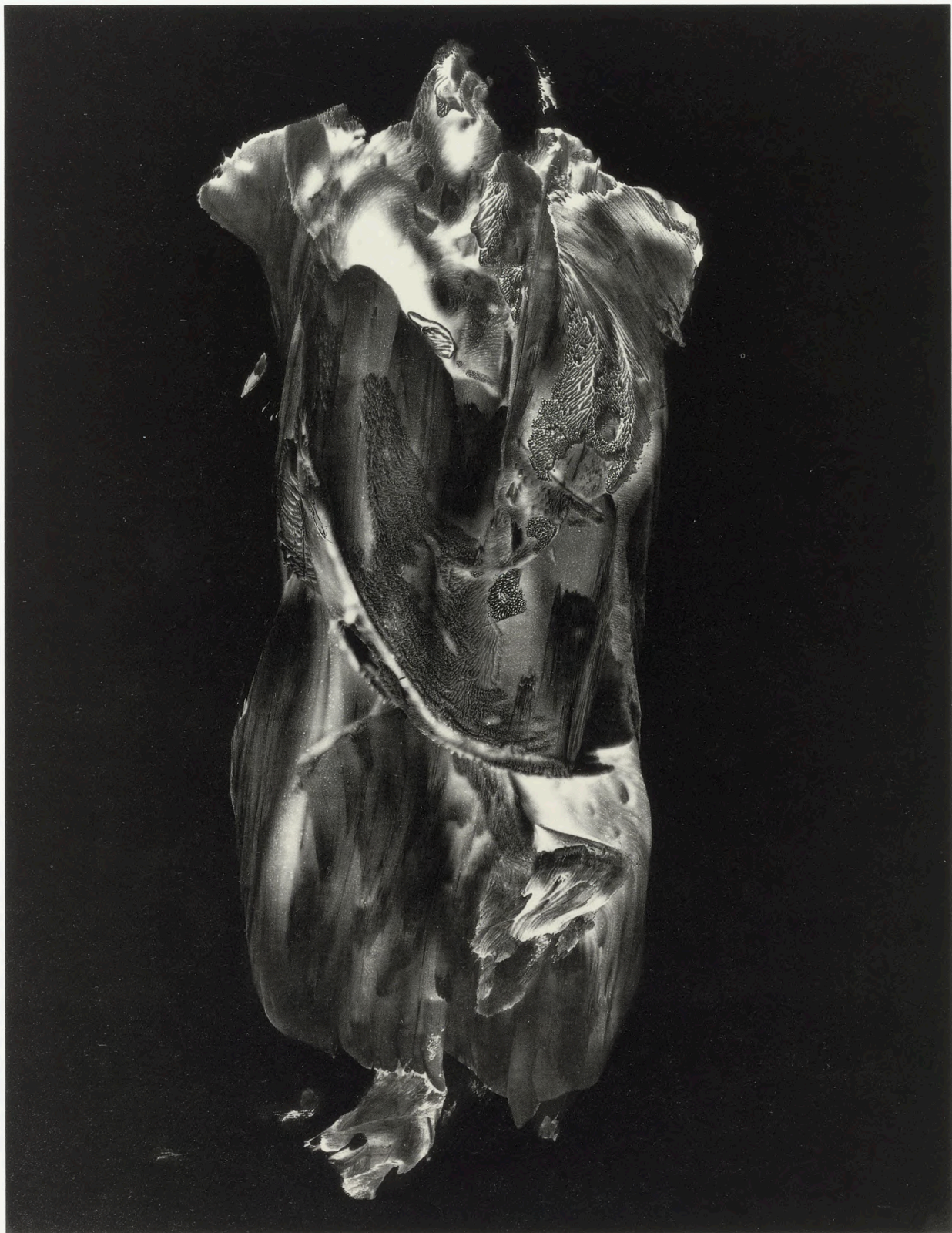
Frederick Sommer makes no concessions to the casual observer in his photographs. He packs every bit of picture space with significance of one kind or another. Consequently, a superficial glance at his pictures reveals about as much as a locked trunk of its contents.¹⁸

Sommer's photographs do not, by his own admission, approach the metaphysical or subconscious borders of Surrealism. He believes it more useful to consider the idea of superreality as a condition where "certain realities co-exist." Therefore, he believes the person who understands a number of realities views the world from a superior vantage point. A constructive observation indeed, as a close look at Surrealism reveals that the most influential art of that genre was often created by those artists who kept their distance from the core of the movement. Picasso's work was admired by the Surrealists and he was unquestionably influenced by the movement which he disdained to join. Likewise, the American artist Joseph Cornell existed at the periphery of Surrealism early in his career. Sommer too kept his distance, although he embraced certain Surrealist concepts. He was already studying the possibilities of the automatic and the accidental in his work when he first met Max Ernst. Undoubtedly, the inspiration of the collective spirit of Surrealism combined with his association with Ernst, influenced the direction of his work at that time.

Beyond Surrealism Sommer does feel that fantasy and the imaginary world are too quickly disregarded in photography:

In photography we try to think of a certain reality existing and we think that this is the norm. And so if any fantasy or imaginary domain encroaches on photography, we begin to think of it as being a little something different or unexpected. But, as a matter of fact, I really think that photography is made for that particular domain, more than it is for the transcribing of reality.¹⁹

28 PARACELSUS (PAINT ON CELLOPHANE) 1959



***Of all the disciplines, photography has the longest leg-
gato in terms of tone.***²⁰

In the mid 50s Sommer's investigations turned to images which did not require the use of a camera. Cameraless images, commonly termed photograms, had been pioneered by Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray in the 1920s, but few American photographers had shown an interest in them. Continuing his devotion to drawing, Sommer developed a method of working with paint on cellophane, making the paint so tacky he could control its application. The images are wholly abstract, although some of the earliest ones suggest figurative interpretations. *Paracelsus* 1959 (cat. no. 28), depicts a sculpture-like torso with a remarkable distribution of photographic tones and textures which give the image a burnished, refined look. It is a tour-de-force example of the photographic medium at its most elegant perfection, and the print performance by Sommer is superb. The interaction of the light in and around what looks to be a surgically opened human body solidifies the surfaces of the abstract subject as though it were dressed in a thin suit of armor. This image is not about extremities, it pulls us inside as if it were intended as an x-ray of mankind for all to inspect. The activity and sense of motion of the form lead us in and out of the fatness and leanness of the applied paint. The irregularity of the edges outlined against the deep black background (the transparent and unpainted area) establishes the visual framework. The image is as hallucinatory and fantastic as any of the artist's photographed assemblages, and it defies its existence as photograph as much as it captures the total essence of the photographic medium.

He was later to explore the application of smoke on grease coated cellophane and smoke on glass. Taking these synthetic negatives into the darkroom, he then exposes them in the enlarger in the conventional way. Sommer feels that, "if all goes well, the definition is magnificent; there are no grain problems because soot can out perform silver images any day."²¹

As an artist who has painted, drawn, and created musical scores, in addition to photographing, Sommer is continually investigating new ways to broaden the range of possibilities in his work. Always exercising meticulous care he selects light sensitive materials or fine textured drawing papers with attention to the ways certain shapes and forms can be deposited on their surfaces.

I've tried not to give up painting, not to give up drawing, not to give up making musical scores. I've tried to figure out a way in which all of these things could be a stage to becoming a photograph.²²

Still motivated by the intense curiosity of a young man, Frederick Sommer continues today to create complex images, held by exquisite surfaces. His explorations may go beyond our ability to immediately apprehend them, for as Sommer notes:

You have to learn to take chances, you have to learn to appreciate juxtapositions, a set of things, a constellation of things in a way that you just happen to meet. You have to be flexible enough to see the possibilities.²³

Leland Rice

Notes

¹Henry Holmes Smith, et al., "Frederick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects," *Aperture* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1956, p. 103.

²Frederick Sommer, "The Linguistic and Pictorial Logic of General Aesthetics," 1979. (Typewritten.)

³According to Ludwig von Bertalanffy, there are interdependencies that link all the elements in the physical/biological world, as well as in the behavioral/social world. Mathematical equations used in the physical world to chart certain conditions can be applied to plotting political developments in the social world. The general theorist views the world not as a series of autonomous divisions, but as a single entity wherein everything is linked to everything else and there are no discontinuities. *General System Theory* (New York: G. Braziller, 1969).

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from a taped conversation between the author and the artist in August of 1974.

⁵Studs Terkel, Interview with Frederick Sommer on radio station WFMT Chicago, March 13, 1963, on the occasion of an exhibition of the artist's work at the Art Institute of Chicago. (Taped.)

⁶"Frederick Sommer 1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture* Vol. 10, No. 4, 1962, n.p.

⁷Frederick Sommer, "An Extemporaneous Talk at the Art Institute of Chicago, October, 1970," *Aperture* Vol. 16, No. 2, 1971, n.p.

⁸"Frederick Sommer 1939-1962," *Aperture*, 1962, n.p.

⁹Frederick Sommer, *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics* in collaboration with Stephen Aldrich (Stockton, New Jersey: By the Author, Prescott, Arizona, 1972), n.p.

¹⁰Sommer, "Extemporaneous Talk," *Aperture*, 1971, n.p.

¹¹Gerald Nordland quoting Sommer in *Frederick Sommer* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia College of Art, 1968), p. 6.

¹²"Frederick Sommer 1939-1962," *Aperture*, 1962, n.p.

¹³Sommer, "Extemporaneous Talk," *Aperture*, 1971, n.p.

¹⁴Nordland, p. 6.

¹⁵Center for Creative Photography, *Special Report, Summer, 1976* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1976), p. 24.

¹⁶Nordland, p. 9.

¹⁷Jonathan Green, "'Aperture' in the 50s, the word and the way," *Afterimage*, Vol. 6, No. 8, March, 1978, p. 11.

¹⁸Smith et al, *Aperture*, 1956, p. 103.

¹⁹Terkel, Interview with Sommer.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Sommer, "Extemporaneous Talk," *Aperture*, 1971, n.p.

²²Ibid.

²³Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976* (Washington, D.C.: The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1976), p. 248.

Reproduction of a portion of the program for *The Music of Frederick Sommer*.

THE MUSIC OF FREDERICK SOMMER

Performed
by

Walton MendelsonFlute
Stephen AldrichPiano

Prescott College Auditorium

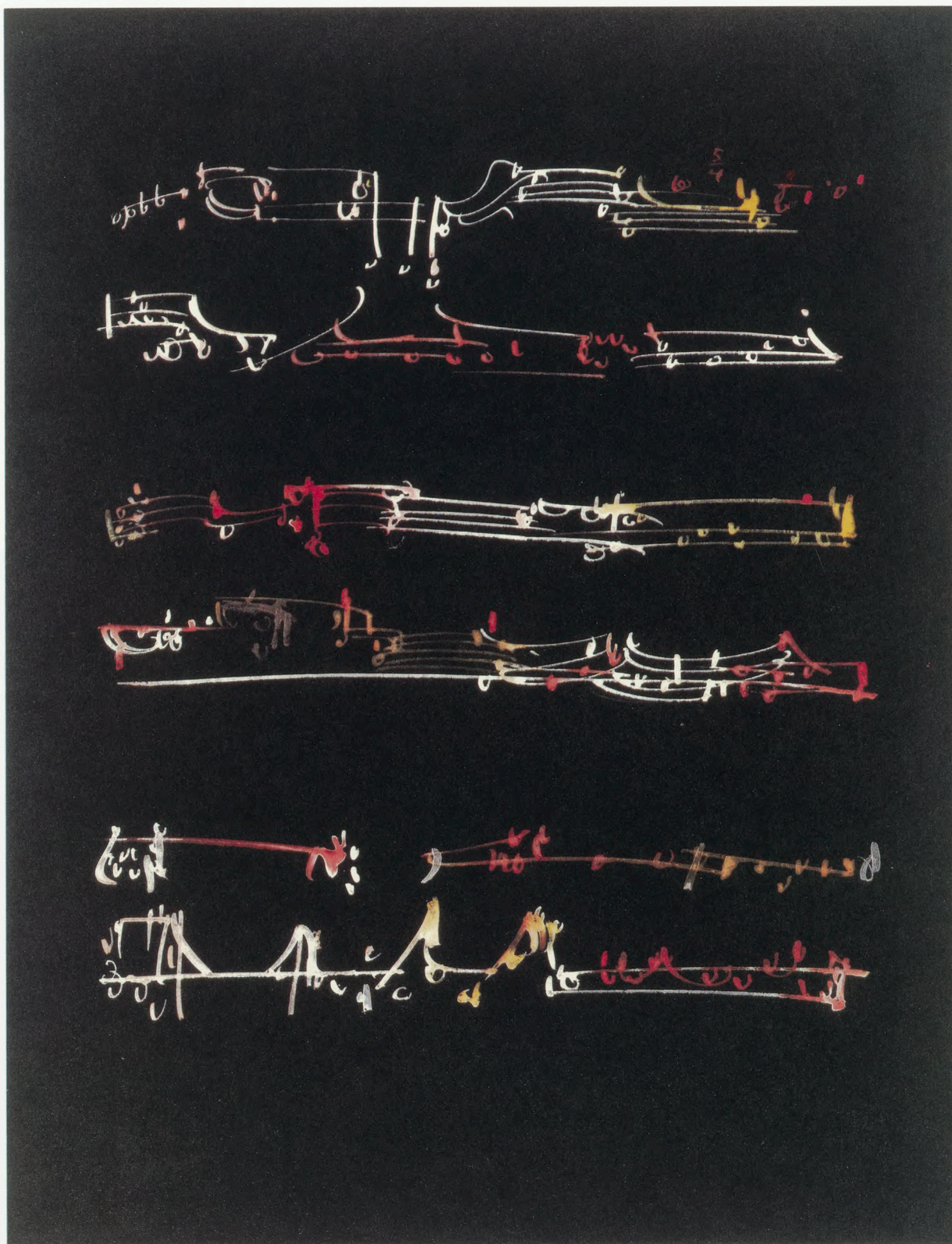
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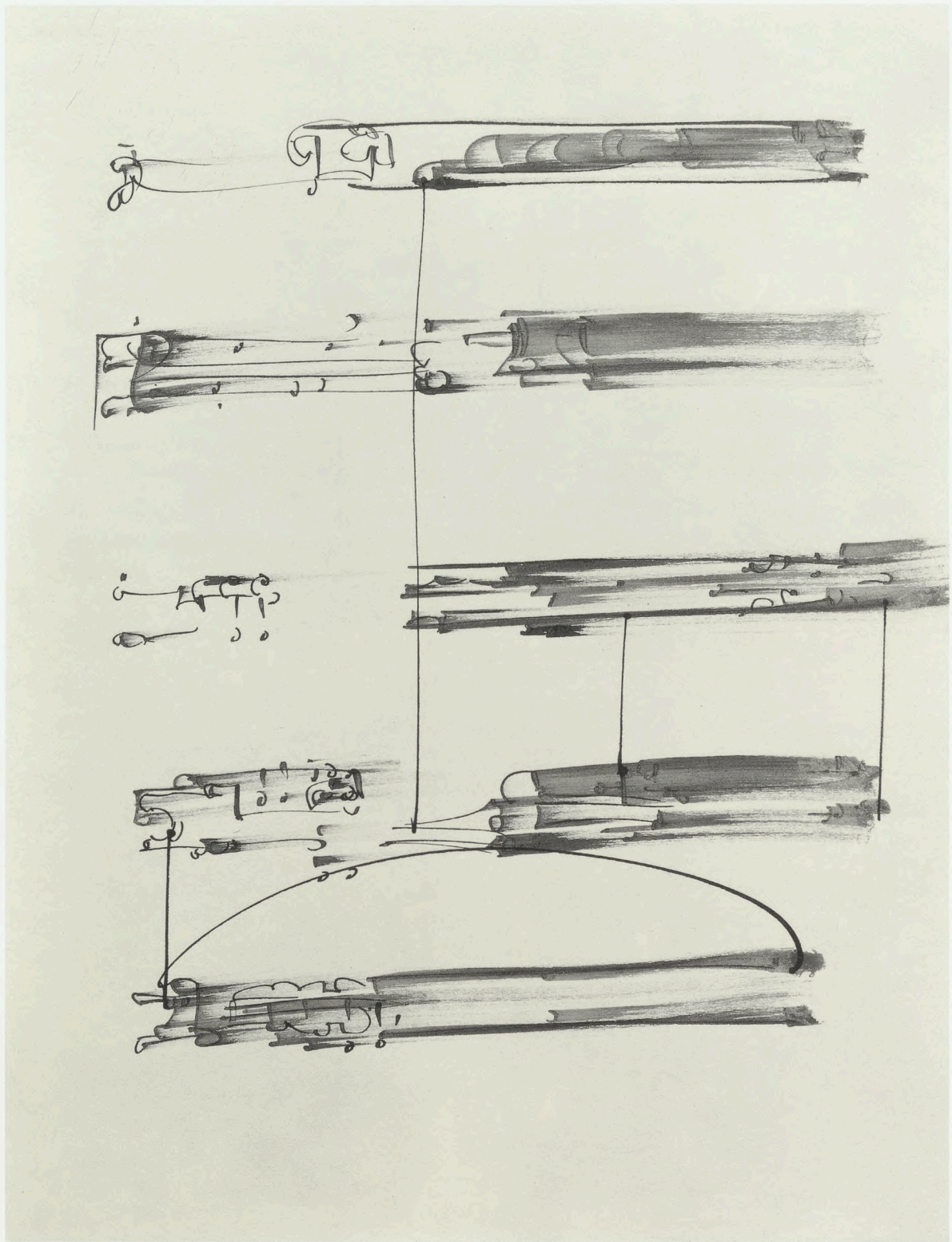
Wednesday May 8, 1968

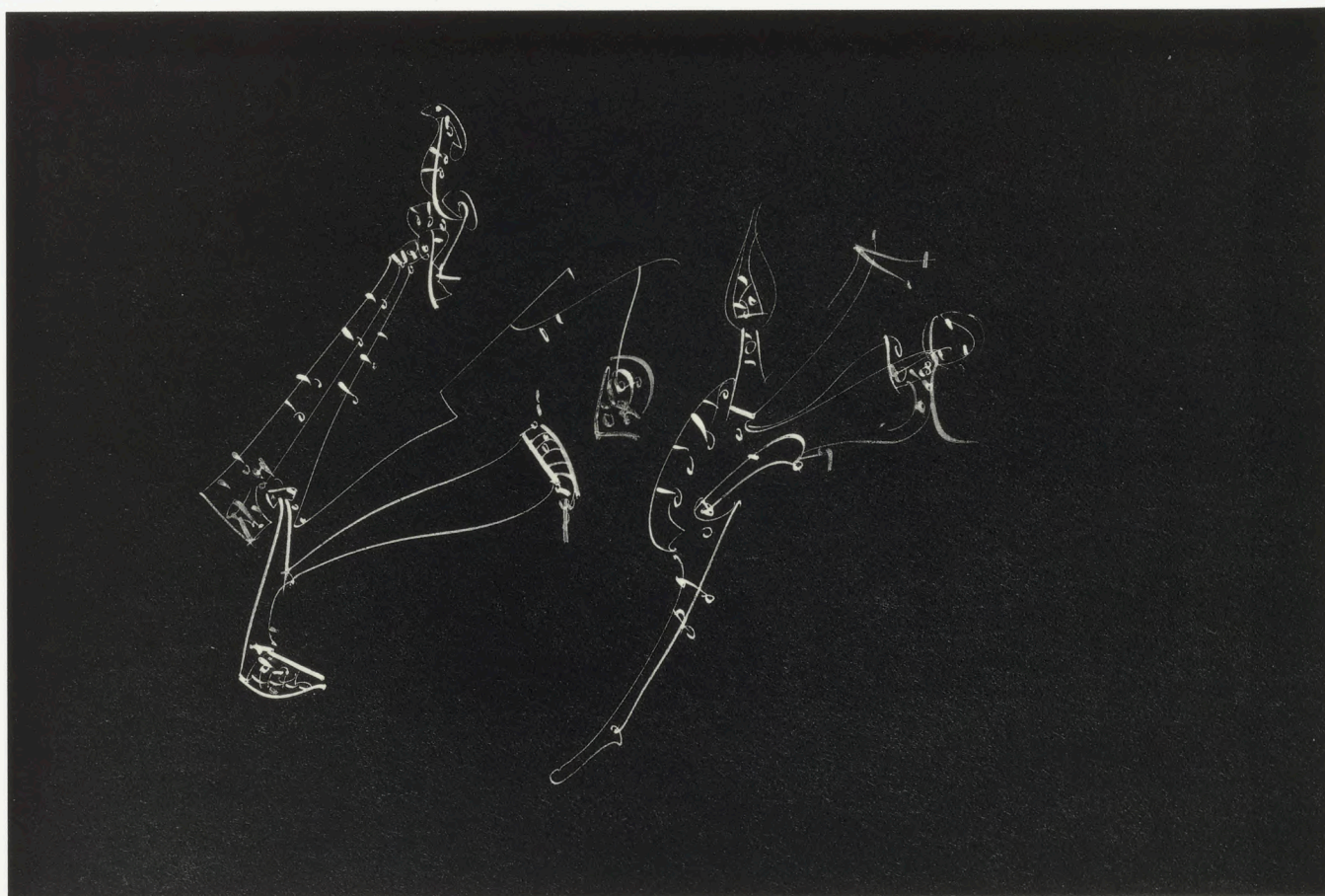
PROGRAM NOTES

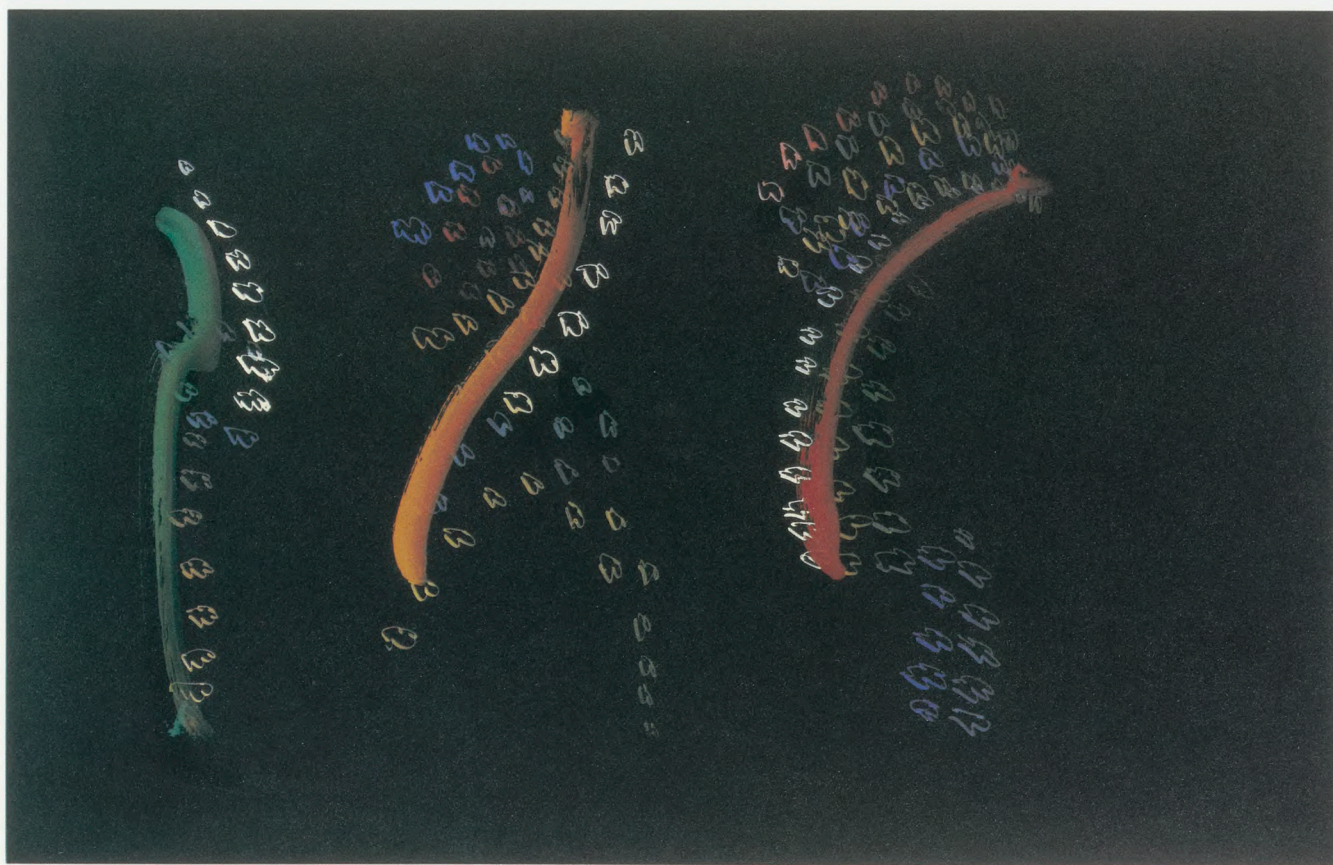
In the early thirties, Frederick Sommer began to study musical scores. The emphasis of his approach lay in the graphic aspects of scores. He found that the music of the best composers was invariably more elegant in its visual aspects than that of lesser composers. This suggested to him the making of scores which would be the product of graphic concern, and to see if such scores could result in fine music when played. The first of these scores was produced in the winter of 1934.

The task of the performer, in approaching such a score, is to try to translate its visual qualities (i.e., clusters of forms, shapes, lines, colors, and total organization) into the positional coherence of musical notation. The score is thus a framework for the translation of visual into musical values, and when carefully followed, will result in a coherence no longer dependent on repetition and variation of musical themes. In these scores visual and musical art become one.













NOTES ON A PHOTOGRAPH

BY FREDERICK SOMMER

Jan-Gunnar Sjölin
from *Kalejdoskop* 1976:6
translation by Ada M. Fung
Los Angeles, November 15, 1979
edited by the author

You can see them here: the dead coyotes, just dry hides around the collapsed bodies' skeletons, turning threateningly toward the observer even in death; the artificial leg, apparently found on a dump, provisionally wrapped in rags, against the cracked and spotted backside of an old piece of linoleum; the rocky landscape that stretches out monotonously in every direction, anti-human, inaccessible; the dump where bottles, sharp pieces of glass and bits of wood with malicious spikes are piled up as far as the eye can see; unidentifiable wastes from the industrial society, burned out, disintegrating, against the shrivelled surface of the dried-out paint in a paint can. Why would anyone want to keep the memory of these miserable relics? Why should anyone torment himself further with such sights? There are many who turn away disgusted from Frederick Sommer's pictures without an answer to these questions. But there are many also for whom the experience of the power and beauty of the pictures takes precedence over any feeling of repugnance from the first time they are faced with them.

Almost all of Sommer's pictures show us people and things somewhere on the way toward annihilation: the naked woman, for example, unreal and unpalpable in her blurredness; or the pieces of paper torn apart by razor blades so that they can scarcely hang together; the masterpieces of art distorted beyond recognition; the fragments of illustrations from old books and magazines; or the patterns made in soot, the last traces of something that once had a more tangible existence. What is remarkable is that somewhere on the way toward annihilation there has been a rebirth. One is reminded of a painting in the Franciscan Monastery in Cimiez that shows a pile of manure out of which a lily is growing. The repugnant, the repulsive has been transformed into its opposite. The moment of transformation has been caught in an image—has been created through the painting itself. This text is an attempt to en-

compass such a moment in the creation of another work which is also filled with the poetry of decay, the photograph *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John*.

Frederick Sommer once saved a peculiarly formed lump of metal, the origin of which would seem inscrutable, unless one learned that it came from the melted remains of a burned-out wrecked automobile. The bit of metal, which is almost flat on one side, is small enough to fit in the hand. Sommer collects this kind of seemingly worthless junk without any definite purpose, without knowing how he is going to use it. At another time, perhaps earlier, perhaps later, a friend gave him a couple of illustrations torn from an old book, with the comment that if someone were able to make something out of them, it would be Sommer. The material appeared anything but promising and is described by Sommer as fawning and deceitful pictures, apparently taken from an old children's book.

Exactly how and when the transformation of these two elements occurred I do not know, but from the moment of their mutual conjunction, it is difficult to perceive of them as separate objects. It becomes impossible to see the lump of metal as only inert matter; such is the strength of its affinity with the new entity of which it is a part, such is the totality with which it has been transmuted. The adaptation was perfect even with regard to its dimensions. Sommer needed neither to enlarge nor to diminish the book illustration in order to allow the lump of metal to fit in. The metamorphosis was not totally unproblematical however, since the exact positioning of the lump with respect to the illustration caused certain difficulties. The boy in the picture actually had a fresh, cherubic face with full cheeks, hardly fitting the new context. Sommer therefore placed the bit of metal so that it just covered a part of one cheek, without making the face incomplete.

One might think that the capacity to certify the factual relationship of these objects would be the only important property of the photograph and that its own qualities as a visual object experienced by the observer would be of lesser consequence. Couldn't Sommer have been satisfied with making a photograph purely to document this synthesis of metal and children's book illustration, without worrying about the technical and expressive aspects? In that case he would have adopted the style of much of the photography that has been shown in art galleries around the world for the last ten years. Or couldn't he simply have exhibited the things themselves? In this case he would have avoided a procedure that many consider unphotographic.

I remember sitting in Sommer's studio with the little lump of metal in my hand, looking first at it, then at the photograph. At first they seemed to have little in common. Then after awhile I recognized the form that had been the point of departure for the photograph, but scarcely more than a point of departure. How is it possible that they could make such different impressions? After all, I was sitting in the same room where the picture had been taken in natural daylight that filters through the pine trees outside before it falls in through the large windows. Then I noticed that the reflections of light and shadow fell differently on the real object than in the photograph. I turned it so that the light hit it from the opposite side. The likeness increased then, but there was still a considerable difference. I held the lump of metal up against the photograph and found it to be clearly smaller than in the picture. In order to fill out the negative format Sommer had come so close with the camera that the original had been enlarged. I looked back at the lump of metal, but now at very close range. Then for the first time all of its details took on the same tangibility, the same sense of meaning that I had experienced in the photograph. What in the actual object were scarcely perceivable details became in the picture, through enlargement and lighting, constituents with distinctive characteristics. A similar transformation occurred when the book illustration was photographed. Its lines began to lead their own lives; even the spaces between them became something meaningful. The play of light was activated by dodging and burning during printing and the whole gained a luster that is lacking in the original picture.

It is far from a question of simply producing a document. Instead of photographing the objects in their pure factuality, Sommer saves them from their perishability—even when they are pieces of trash—by holding on to

the slightest suggestions of life. By capturing qualities that can only be perceived under exceptional circumstances, he fulfills in his own way the human task of "puffing life into stones and pebbles," something that could not have been achieved by exhibiting the photographed objects themselves, not even with extensive instructions as to how they should be observed. It is easy to imagine that Sommer thinks of a photograph which confines itself to a verification of the mere existence of things without bringing out their character and life as but one more example of what he perceives as the great fault with our culture: that we consciously aim to accomplish less than we are actually capable of achieving. One characteristic belonging to those cultures which we usually refer to as primitive, just as it belongs to the artisan production which appears so far removed from that of our Western culture, is the consistent attempt to bring about the best possible product within the framework of the technique and capability at hand. We, on the other hand, intentionally create products that are devised to fall beneath our capabilities.

In complete disagreement with this Western tendency, Sommer's own work has been characterized by a slow, artisan-like production technique. Every year he produces perhaps thirty or so copies of his negatives, and when pressured to produce more, he defends himself by saying that he'll be damned if he is a factory. He uses, as he says, the best camera he can afford, not (as in the advertisement) the one that makes it easiest to photograph, but rather the one with which he can produce the best possible result. He still uses the same 8 x 10 format camera he bought in 1938, although he has had the front elements modernized; the works with which we are concerned here are contact printed from the large format negatives. For the photograph under discussion he used a lens of a later model, Schneider's Repro-Claron, with a 210 mm focal length. At longer distances it does not cover the entire 8 x 10 format, but it is an excellent choice for the protracted extension employed in producing this particular photograph.

These technical concerns, how all this happened, how Sommer proceeded, are not the essential problem to be explored, however. Much more important, but also more difficult to answer, is the question of why this happened, of its validity, especially since Sommer seldom knows exactly where he is going, seldom sets up definite goals for his actions. It is a question that therefore must not be confused with the problem concerning conscious motives and opinions.

The question remains: what is it, exactly, that happens when two so essentially different elements are put together; why does such a total transformation occur? One experience I had with Sommer at least infers an answer. In the middle of a conversation he got up and said he wanted to read me a passage from Plato. He took a volume containing the English translation of the later dialogues, opened the thick book and began to read. Under normal circumstances I have learned to understand his American English—with its very slight accent—at least superficially, although not always the deeper meaning that he often puts into his statements. But this time I had difficulty following what he said. Sommer was reading quite fast, almost like scansion, and I stumbled around between words and sentences that ended before I had time to understand them completely. I bent forward over the book, to get some support from the printed text, and then I discovered something: Sommer wasn't at all reading word for word, sentence for sentence; he rather chose a word here, a word there, and put them together into new combinations. To make it easier for me to follow along, he pointed out how he read, from top to bottom, from bottom to top, from left to right and from right to left. The words formed themselves into sentences, completely correct ones by the rules of sentence structure, but quite different from those Plato had written. I understood why I had had difficulty in following the text: in normal speech I do not have to understand every word in order to comprehend the whole. But in what Sommer calls "skip-reading" the content is so new, so unexpected, that I had no chance to fill out what I failed to comprehend immediately.

A direct correspondence to this procedure can be seen in the processes involved in the making of Sommer's *Dürer Variations* from 1966. Not only were several woodcuts by Dürer assembled into a single image; but also within each separate woodcut a choice was made to bring out certain vertical layers, while suppressing others almost to the point of disappearance. Sommer achieved this effect in part by folding the page like a bellows, rhythmically compressing the picture laterally; and in part by then lighting the surfaces in such a way, as to illuminate certain layers and let others fall into half-shade.

The photograph with which we are primarily concerned was also produced by a type of "skip-reading," although it was brought about not by reading a text or observing a picture, but through a selection and composition of the impressions to which we are continually

Albrecht Dürer, *Ecce Homo* (Christ Presented to the People), c. 1497–1500



Albrecht Dürer, *Harrowing of Hell* (Christ in Limbo), 1510







Albrecht Dürer, *Betrayal of Christ*, 1510



exposed. Two things, separated in time and place, and without any obvious connection with one another, have been subsumed into a unity that appears just as close, just as natural, as that of subject and predicate. The procedure in both cases can seem preposterous at first glance, but it is actually well known to all of us. When we experience the world around us, we do not patiently register all of its features in their good order before putting the pieces together into an all-encompassing total view. Instead we fix our attention first on one particular phenomenon, then upon another, thereby gathering sufficient information to achieve the comprehension of a meaningful structure and identify the totality into which they fit. Thus we carry out a kind of "skip-reading" by associating things and relationships around us, without taking notice of all that which is insignificant to our needs. This primary capacity to see meaningful connections between mutually distant phenomena is surely the ultimate prerequisite for Sommer's creative work. The difference lies chiefly in

our not being accustomed to casting our nets out as far as Sommer, and our ignoring or literally trampling under foot those things whose meaningful connections he reveals.

In this Sommer appears to be a follower of Surrealism, with its peculiar object combinations which were not meant to create chaos and meaninglessness, but rather the opposite: to show connections and significances that otherwise would never have become obvious. Although Sommer respects Surrealism, he looks upon it as a current in the past. He finds it important to stress a certain distance from the movement, because there have unfortunately been many who have thought that he could be characterized thoroughly and definitively by labeling him a Surrealist. He expresses this distance in his repeated statements that the Surrealists did not accept the implications of what they themselves had done. He uses his own "skip-reading" to exemplify the significance of this. Upon extensive study of a philosopher's writings, one always finds that the same or similar ideas return time after time, albeit in new combinations. It is as if each had at his disposal material that, although finite, could be reworked and combined in endlessly different ways without ever exhausting its possibilities. A new creative talent can approach this material and find in it additional combinations that still lie within the framework of the original, and it is within this context that Sommer sees the theoretical justification for his "skip-reading." When he reads from Plato's works in his special way, Sommer considers himself still within Plato's world of thought. One would never be able to rise above the level that was determined by the original writer since the primary material sets definite limits for that which is possible in "skip-reading."

This is the consequence, according to Sommer, that the Surrealists failed to infer from their own experiences. Surrealism would surely like to see in Sommer's "skip-reading" a possibility of revealing unconscious thoughts, the hidden undercurrent in the work of writers that are conceived of as superficial or popular. In this way one would have one more opportunity to break down the barrier between that which is considered good and bad literature. I have some difficulty in agreeing with Sommer in his criticism of Surrealism on this point, especially since his own work seems to give strong grounds for the point of view of Surrealism—at least, with respect to "skip-reading" in its further application to our whole visual environment. By combining completely disparate elements taken from the most

insignificant contexts, he has created new meaning-complexes that far surpass the given materials. One side of Surrealism's dream has therefore become a reality in his works. In another respect, however, the Surrealists probably expected too much from the free association between things when they believed that this would make all people equal as poets. The relieving combinations in Sommer's pictures, his *ars combinatoria*, are not everyman's art.

There are two compelling reasons to draw attention to Sommer's "skip-reading" in this context. The first has already been touched upon rather extensively: namely, that it evinces our ability to combine things that literally or figuratively lie far apart, to discover connections where none actually ought to be found. The second is that "skip-reading" reveals the longing and the struggle of a human being to penetrate into the conceptual world which is the legacy from another man or a past age. Who could deny that Sommer must have achieved an entirely original insight into Plato's and Dürer's worlds?

This behavior regarding our cultural inheritance from the past also plays its role in the image under scrutiny. The "cement" that binds together the elements in this photograph is so strong that the whole appears to be an innate unit, not one composed of objects with no prior relationship. It is a question of illusions: first, the illusion that changes the lump of metal into a group of people, a mother who holds her child in her arms, surrounded by interested observers. The boy who looks out from behind the stone bench naturally contributes greatly in placing the scene in a human framework. But the illusion is so intense that the inert matter of the metal—even if it were isolated from the surrounding park landscape—would be perceived as human and alive, related to the observer once he had seen its human connection. One could wonder about how easily influenced we are, how little it takes to make us grasp the possibility of seeing something recognizable in a thing that we know very well is something quite different. One can even wonder if we are correct in accepting that this is a kind of deviation from the normal, if the power to imagine things is not actually the basis for our normal experience of objects in our world. But something must be added to this, a stratum that at least any person with knowledge of art history cannot help noticing. Similar family groups have played a large role in religious art through representations of the Virgin and Child. Far from wishing to suppress such

Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and Infant St. John*, c. 1499, National Gallery, London



associations, Sommer has on the contrary drawn our attention to them, by his choice of title for the work: *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John*. The preciseness of this title eliminates any uncertainty about whom the figures represent. But even without the title, such an interpretation would have been close at hand, due to the structural resemblance of the photograph to the best known representations of the motif, those by Leonardo da Vinci. Even more than the painted version in Paris, where the lamb is represented instead of the child John, the resemblance applies to the sketch from ca. 1499 that is found in London. It is from having seen his photograph as a kind of paraphrase of Leonardo's picture, that Sommer was able to identify the different figures. We are thus confronted with another illusion—that the photograph in some way mirrors Leonardo's work. This is clearly a question of a different type of relationship than that to Plato's dialogues and Dürer's woodcuts. Their works contribute to the creative process itself, are used up during this process, and from the ashes rise at last in

completely separate works. But Leonardo's painting is not touched directly by the process; it exists alongside as a prerequisite for our experience of the final product. It is not a question of an intentional copy, but of one of the coincidences which lie at the basis of man's hope of finding some sort of meaning in his existence.

In order to throw light upon Sommer's relationship to Leonardo, it is interesting to draw a comparison to a totally different type of work, Sommer's *Musical Scores*. Sommer once made the observation, that the greatest composers' scores are not only musically, but also purely visually, superior to others. Without knowing anything about musical principles, he began to create scores with the single requirement, that they be visually attractive. Attempts have been made to play this music, and according to Sommer himself, it does not sound like the cacophony one might have expected, but quite pleasing—like the music of the same old masters whose style of notating he had imitated, and yet different. There is in this way of relating to the art of former times a nearness and immediacy that precludes normal respectful worship at a distance. Sommer preserves scattered remnants of the culture of the past, somewhat as he makes his finds in the Arizona desert. When he surrenders them they receive new life and continue to exist for some time to come, but they appear in a new guise and it is possible that even Leonardo's picture has not escaped the transformation. In the future it may not

be possible to see it in any other way than in the particular light which Sommer has directed toward it.

Finally, the photograph also presents another and completely different illusion. I stand back from it a bit and see suddenly that the formless lump appears to lie above the surface of the photograph. I get a clear conception of its thickness, its weight, its faint metallic luster. I have a feeling that I should be able to go over to the picture and pick off the piece of metal, take it in my hand and weigh it. I should be able to let my hand run over the surface that varies from the "heads'" even porousness to the flat leaf's roughness. The capacity to awaken illusion in this respect was comprehended soon after the invention of photography as the foremost characteristic of the medium, and with each new technical advance it was claimed that it was not possible to achieve a more total realism. At the same time each new stage of development was represented by its conventions, its technical and esthetic solutions to the problem of translating three dimensional space to the two dimensional surface. This particular photograph is, however, something quite different, an illusion without qualification and without mannerism, as self-evident as that of the image on the retina. I know of only two photographers who have achieved it in their works: Edward Weston, especially during the 30's and 40's, and Frederick Sommer.

It is obvious that this illusion works in a direction that is the opposite of the reference to the Renaissance model as it brings the image relentlessly back to its material origin. The leap from the Virgin Mary and Child to the wreckage of a burned-out car is shorter than one would imagine. It cannot be without significance that Sommer used these worthless relics in order to give the illusion of living beings, of Biblical figures, of masterworks of art. It tells us something about the unity of opposites. We have thus returned to the question that was posed in the beginning: why Sommer in his pictures shows things that commonly are considered worthless and even repulsive. He has at times articulated the necessity of using motifs that are at hand, the stoic acceptance of all that one finds, as a precondition for enduring satisfaction. I cannot comprehend this as other than as a defense against the demand for our adaptation to commonly accepted norms. Of course these motifs must in themselves have had a particularly special value for Sommer. He must have experienced the deep satisfaction of following his own conviction in spite of the pressure that is directed against those who work in opposition to the prevailing conventions and social demands.

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Frederick Sommer

THE POETIC LOGIC OF ART AND AESTHETICS

in collaboration with
Stephen Aldrich

1972

Words represent images:
nothing can be said for which there is no image.

Linkages between images exist a priori
and are the logic of display.
Linkages between words are the logic of grammar.

Images can be named; linkages can only be displayed.
Images and their linkages are states of affairs.
Words and their linkages are propositions.

Words occupy language structure as display of grammar:
what can be said can be seen as represented image.

Position is the prime element of form and from position are derived all aspects of structure and form.

Elegance of form is the product of elegance of choice within specific limitations.

Quantitative and qualitative choice of positions in space and choice of occupiers for those positions define the logic of form.

Position and occupier build structure and content. Structure and content together constitute form.

In a generalized condition of space, the sum of all occupiable positions is the potential for creation.

Structure is a set of positions in space,
and content is a corresponding set of elements
which occupy the positions of that structure.

Our fundamental empathy is to the structure that content reveals.

The quality of content enhances its capacity to articulate structure.
Quality is adequate correspondence between structure and content.

Effectively positioned occupiers are images to which empathy
can be given. As image, content and structure are one.

In dance, as well as in paintings, drawings or musical scores, empathy is given to the gravity-related distribution of leverages across the visual field.

A dancer's elegant articulation of structure is display of inventive consent to gravity which mirrors our own need to honor gravity on all occasions.

Equilibrium is the legato of positional linkages within images.

Empathy is given to occupier: the dancer in transit from position to position within the dance as structure.

Gravity is the cohesion of matter as well as the cohesion of our empathy to structure within images.

Whatness is concerned with content.
In the solemnity of every hour life returns.

Whereness is concerned with linkages.
The legato of one squirrel holds a forest together.

art feeling
feeling reason

reason induction
induction poetic logic

poetic logic deduction
deduction symbolic logic

symbolic logic reality
reality science

As reasoning from display,
the intuitions of art and science
are noble conditions of technique.

Life is the most durable fiction that matter has yet come up with
and art is the structure of matter as life's most durable fiction.

Aesthetics celebrates art as the poetic logic of form.

Poetic logic is the sensuous apprehension of what we
do not yet understand in the presence of reality.

Poetic logic had to invent art to understand nature
as the positional growth of structure
within the matrix that is life.

We are the ones who put life into stones and pebbles.
When feeling is lucid, structure is art.



1 UNTITLED, NEGATIVE #66 (CHICKEN PARTS) 1939







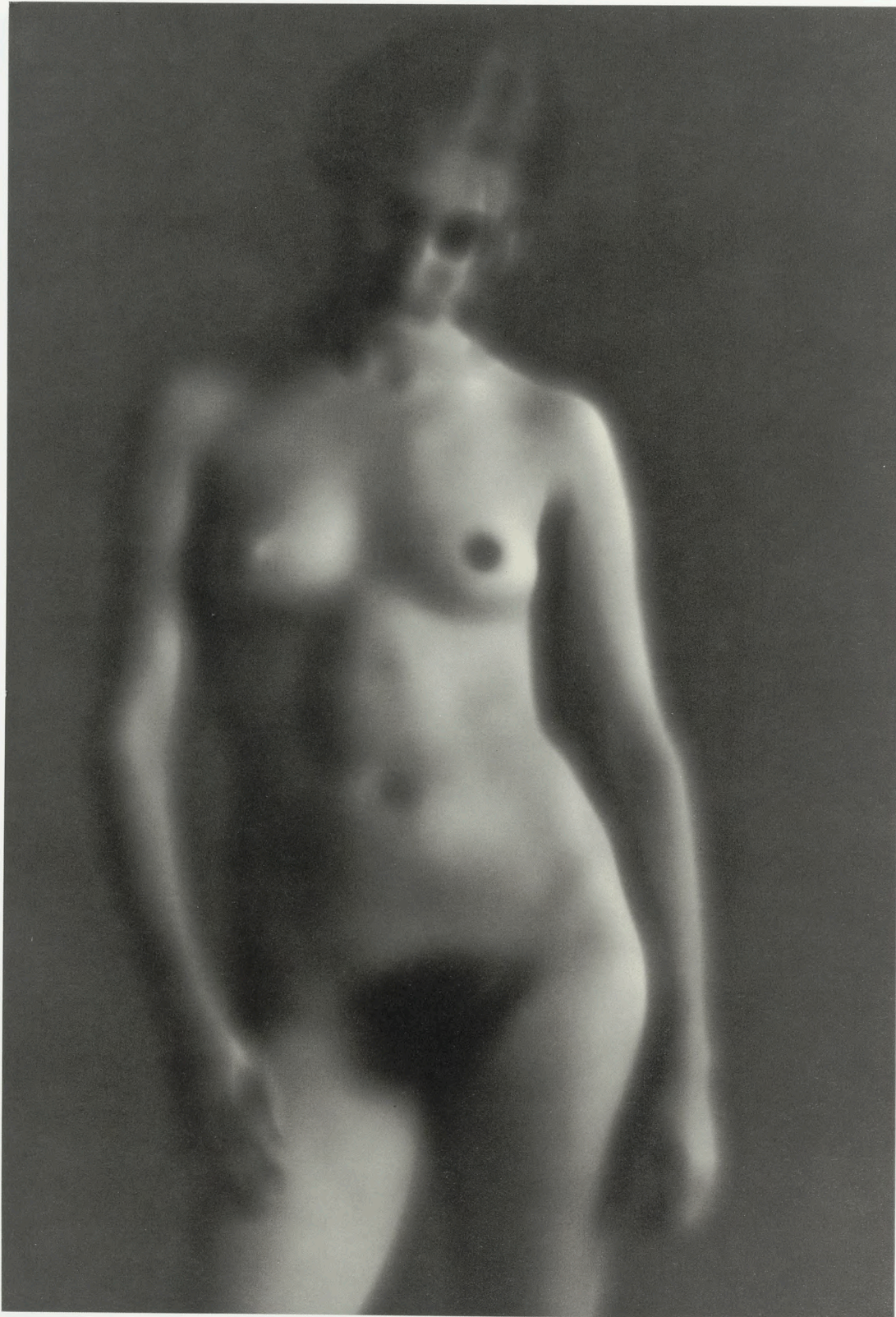


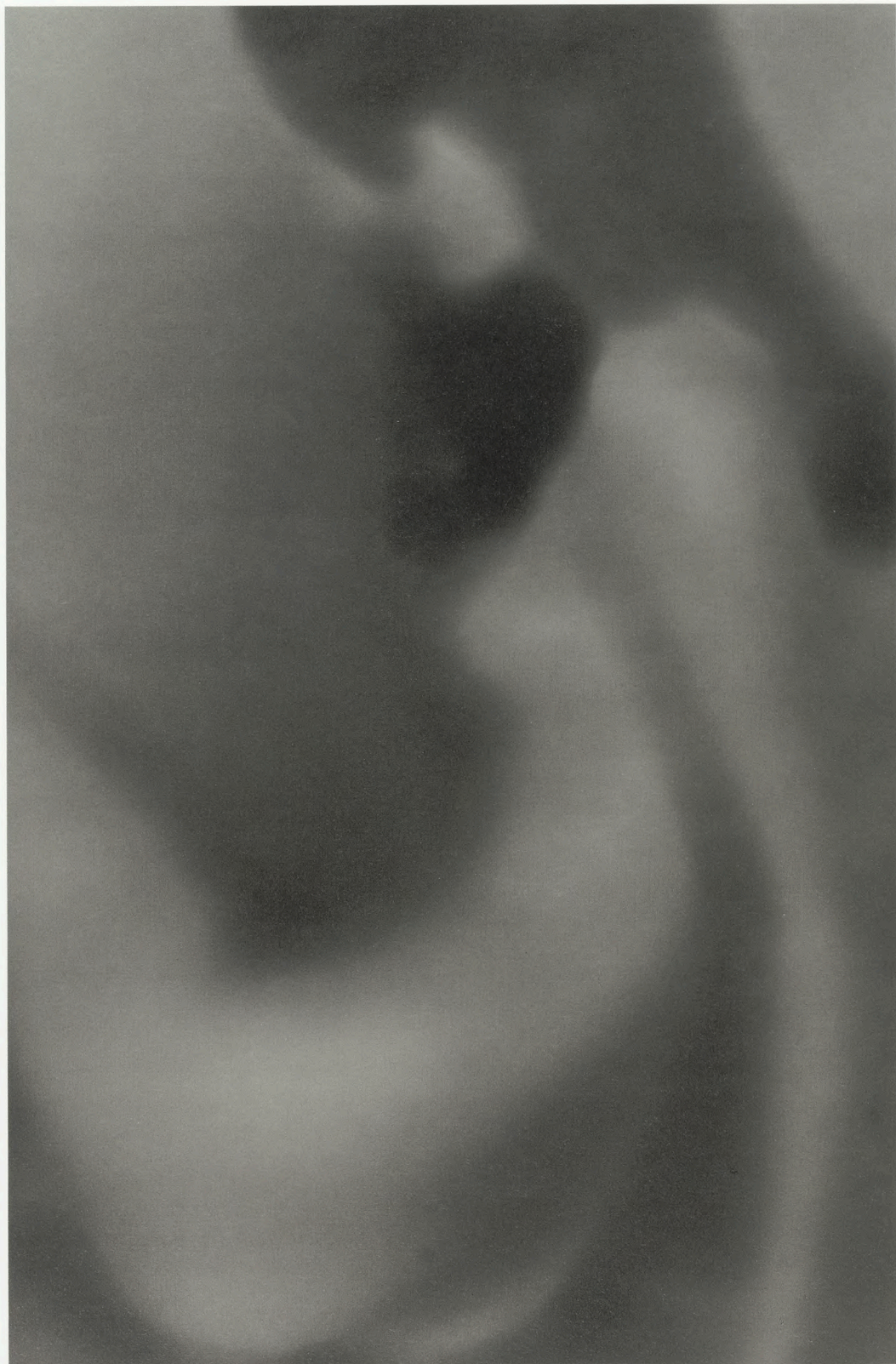


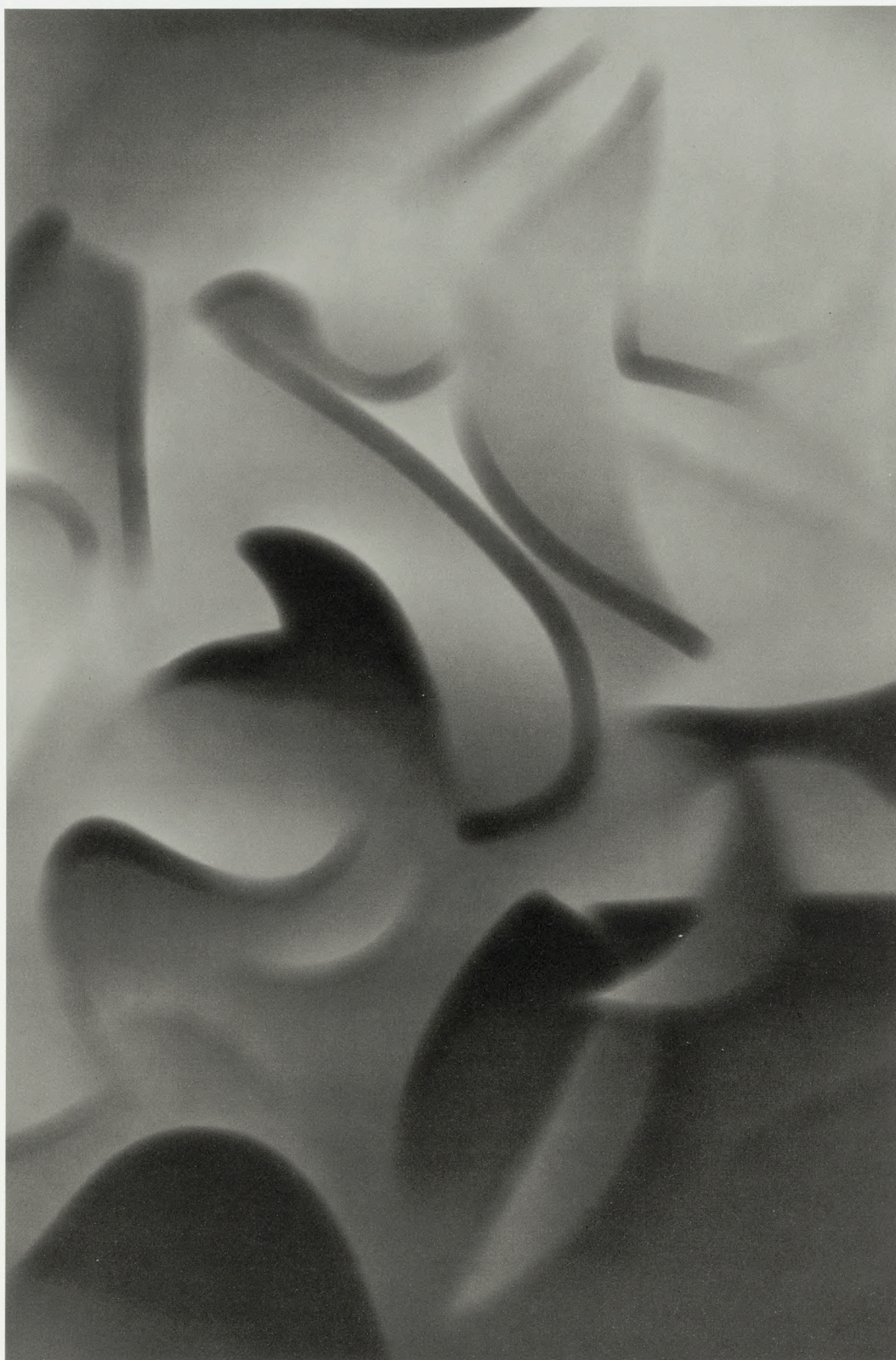




31 UNTITLED (NUDE STANDING) 1961







47 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1967



27 UNTITLED (PAINT ON CELLOPHANE) 1958







CATALOGUE

CHRONOLOGY

- 1905 Born September seventh in Angri, Italy to German father and Swiss mother.
- 1913 Family moves to São Paulo, Brazil. At age of seven, becomes fluent in Spanish, French, and Portuguese in addition to native Italian and German. Father a city planner, landscape architect and horticulturist attracted to Brazil's tropical climate.
- 1916 Family moves to Rio de Janeiro. Working alongside father, completes first drawing at age eleven. Later that year begins work as draftsman in father's architectural office.
- 1921 At age sixteen wins second prize in Brazilian architectural competition.
- 1923 At age eighteen designs municipal garden in Rio de Janeiro. Architectural client of father's sparks his growing interest in visiting the United States. Subsequently emigrates to America where he is hired as assistant to Edward Gordon Davis, Chairman of Landscape Architecture Department, Cornell University. Through studies there with Davis, begins translating subjective language of fine arts into more precise language of science. Assists professors by making slides for lectures from own drawings and sketches.
- 1925– Meets Clarence Kennedy, and through him
- 1927 Edwin H. Land, inventor of the Polaroid camera, with whom he spends a memorable evening in intense conversation. To his regret, they do not meet again.
- 1927 Receives Master of Arts in Landscape Architecture from Cornell without undergraduate degree, after Brazil's Minister of Education writes Dean of University that experience acquired in Brazil should be equivalent to undergraduate degree.
- 1927– Returns to Rio de Janeiro where he works for
- 1930 father. Practices landscape architecture, city and site planning in Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian cities.
- 1928 Returns to United States to marry Frances Watson.
- 1930– Discovers he has contracted tuberculosis.
- 1931 Travels to various European cities and settles in

- Arosa, Switzerland to recuperate. Here he draws, sketches, and reads art books as well as Nietzsche and Burckhardt. On walk one afternoon spots a Plaubel Makina 2¼" by 3¼" camera in store window. "Toys with idea of photography for first time." Buys the camera and has first photographic experience. Visitor to home mentions developing own film. Sees film emulsion for first time as it comes up under red light. Using Ortho film begins work in small darkroom in basement. Starts to develop mature understanding of modern art.
- 1931 In France and Italy studies art, architecture and Italian gardens. In November travels to Tucson, Arizona to complete recovery; continues painting and drawing. Studies Cezanne and Picasso.
- 1933 Visits Chicago and Increase Robinson Gallery; sees Edward Weston's work for first time in a recently published book of his photographs edited by Merle Armitage.
- 1934 Moves to Los Angeles while Frances studies social work at University of Southern California. Frequent visits to city library lead to discovery of musical compositions and their graphic aspects. In summer shows watercolors at first one-man exhibition, Increase Robinson Gallery.
- 1935 February, moves permanently to Prescott, Arizona. In November takes drawing portfolio to New York. Week spent visiting Stieglitz at An American Place; renews interest in photography.
- 1936 Visits Edward Weston in Santa Monica, California on recommendation of Merle Armitage. Recognizes Weston's decisive use of his print surface. Trades his drawings for Weston's photographs.
- 1937 One man show of watercolors at Howard Putzel Gallery in Hollywood, California.
- 1938 Early in year Charis and Edward Weston visit Prescott while traveling and photographing in Southwest on his Guggenheim Fellowship. They spend five days together. Toward end of year buys Century Universal 8" by 10" camera and takes first 8" by 10" photographs.
- 1939 Composes first musical score.
- 1939– Begins work on Arizona landscapes.
- 1940
- 1940 August and September in New York. Meets Charles Sheeler. Impressed with the elegant economy of his photographs and paintings.
- 1941 Meets Max Ernst and begins a mutually satisfying friendship.
- 1944 September to November in New York.
- 1946 First one man show of photographs, Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Max Ernst settles in Sedona, Arizona, remaining there through the early fifties.
- 1949 Executes first glass print.
- 1951 Participates in conference on photography in Aspen, Colorado.
- 1952 *Diogenes With A Camera*, Museum of Modern Art, exhibit of thirty-eight works including actual objects and backgrounds used in making photographs.
- 1954 Visits Mexico.
- 1955 *Cactus and Rocks* photograph reproduced in *Yves Tanguy*, Museum of Modern Art catalogue, to illustrate influence of Southwest landscapes on Surrealist artists.
- 1956 Begins paint on cellophane work which initiates fourteen year period of investigation into production of synthetic negatives (i.e.: smoke on glass, smoke on cellophane). First major portfolio of photographs reproduced in *Aperture*, Vol. 4, No. 3, with accompanying critical commentary by various photographers.
- 1957– Teaches photography at Institute of Design,
- 1958 Illinois Institute of Technology.
- 1960 Visits Europe for three months, working and traveling.
- 1962 *Aperture* publishes *Frederick Sommer, 1939–1962*, a monograph including thirty photographs.
- 1966– Coordinator Fine Arts Studies, Prescott College,
- 1971 Arizona.
- 1967 Teaches one week summer photography workshop, San Francisco Art Institute.
- 1968 Largest exhibition to date, Philadelphia College of Art, accompanied by catalogue with extensive essay by Gerald Nordland. In May, concert of musical scores presented at Prescott College.
- 1969 Travels to Kyoto, Japan to study aesthetics for six months.
- 1972 Teaches workshop at Apeiron in Millerton, New York. Travels through East and New England for three months. Privately publishes *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics* in collaboration with Steven Aldrich.
- 1974 Awarded Guggenheim Fellowship for photography.
- 1975 The Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, establishes major archive to include fifty prints, negatives, correspondence,

and memorabilia.

- 1977 Featured guest speaker at national convention of the Society for Photographic Education in New York.
- 1977–1978 Travels to New Zealand for three months.
- 1978 Delivers major address in collaboration with Alex Jamison, "Aesthetics: The Linguistic and Pictorial Logic of Photographics," in conjunction with the symposium, "Photography: Where We Are," held at The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. during the installation of the exhibition, *Photographs from the Sam Wagstaff Collection*.
- 1979 Awarded an honorary doctorate in Fine Arts, University of Arizona. Gives a series of seminars and public lectures there during the spring semester. Appointment to Princeton University as Visiting Senior Fellow of the Council of the Humanities and Old Dominion Fellow, Visual Arts, fall semester.

SELECTED ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

- 1934 Increase Robinson Gallery, Chicago (watercolors).
- 1937 Howard Putzel Gallery, Hollywood, California (watercolors).
- 1946 Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California (photographs).
- 1949 Charles Egan Gallery, New York (photographs and drawings).
- 1954 Wittenborn Bookstore, New York.
- 1957 Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago (paintings, drawings, photographs).
- 1963 Art Institute of Chicago (photographs).
- 1965 Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D.C., and travel to Pasadena Art Museum, California (photographs, drawings, objects).
- 1967 Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff.
- 1968 Philadelphia College of Art, and travel to San Francisco Museum of Art, 1969.
- 1972 Light Gallery, New York.
- 1974 Columbia College Photography Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.
Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston.
- 1977 Light Gallery, New York.
- 1979 Light Gallery, New York.
The Art Museum, Princeton University, New Jersey.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1949 *Realism in Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (with Ralph Steiner, Wayne Miller, Tosh Metsumoto).
- 1950 *Photography at Mid-Century*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 1951 *Abstraction in Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1952 *Diogenes with a Camera*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (38 works including actual objects and backgrounds used in the making of photographs).
- 1953 *Contemporary Photography*, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.
The West, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.
- 1956 *Contemporary American Photography*, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris.
- 1959 *Photographer's Choice*, University of Indiana, Bloomington.
- 1960 *The Sense of Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1961 *Twentieth Century American Art Exhibit*, Kalamazoo Art Center, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Michigan.
- 1962 *Fifty Great Photographs from the Museum Collection*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1963 *Photographs from the Southwest*, Tucson Art Center, Arizona.
- 1964 *Photography 64/An Invitational Exhibition*, co-sponsored by the New York State Exposition and organized by George Eastman House, Kodak Pavilion of the New York World's Fair.
Four man photography show, Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio (with Phillip Hyde, Brett Weston, Minor White).
- 1965 *Photography in America 1850–1965*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.
- 1967 *Photography in the Twentieth Century*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.
Six Photographers, University of Illinois, Urbana.
Three Photographers, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.
- 1969 *Master Photographs from The Museum of Modern Art*, organized and circulated by The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Photographs from the Coke Collection (a series), Museum of Albuquerque, New Mexico; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1971; Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, 1973; Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, Davis, 1974.

- 1969– *Human Concern/Personal Torment, the Grotesque in American Art*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.
- 1971 *13 Photographers*, Light Gallery, New York.
- 1973 *Landscape and Discovery*, The Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, Long Island, New York.
After Audubon in Art, Thorne Memorial Art Gallery, Keene, New Hampshire.
Nine Photographers Look Beyond, American Greeting Gallery, New York.
Light and Lens, Hudson River Museum, New York.
Photographs from the Collection of the University of New Mexico, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque.
- 1974 *Photography in America*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Three Photographers, Lunn Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1975 *Picture Puzzles*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1976 *Photographic Process as Medium*, Rutgers University Art Gallery, New Brunswick, New Jersey.
Twentieth Century Photographs, Montgomery Art Gallery, Pomona College, Claremont, California.
The U.C.L.A. Collection of Contemporary American Photographs, Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles.
Photographs from the Center For Creative Photography Collection, Tucson Museum of Art, Arizona.
The Golden Door, Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876–1976, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
American Photography of the Twentieth Century, Master Works from California Collections, Mount St. Mary's College Art Gallery, Los Angeles, California.
Modern Portraits, The Self and Others, Wildenstein Gallery, New York.
- 1977 *Collecting Photography: A Personal Choice*, Focus Gallery, San Francisco, California.
The Target Collection of American Photography, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.
- 1978 *Forty American Photographers*, E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, California.
The Photograph as Artifice, The Art Galleries, California State University, Long Beach and travel.
An Exhibition of Photographs from the Collection of Sam Wagstaff, The Corcoran Gallery of

Art, Washington, D.C. and travel.

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Photographic Surrealism, The New Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cleveland.
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SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Institute of Chicago
Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson
Dayton Art Institute, Ohio
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington
International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York
Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.
New Orleans Museum of Art
Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena
The Art Museum, Princeton University, New Jersey
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence
Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Florida
Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California at Los Angeles
University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

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Bibliography prepared by Terence Pitts, Curator and Librarian, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, with additions by Leland Rice. An asterisk denotes an item not seen by the bibliographer at the time of publication.

VIDEO TAPES

Excerpted from annotations compiled by Timothy Druckrey, Center Assistant, Video Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.

Dedication of Photo-Studies Collection, May 15, 1979
 Brief remarks by Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Frederick Sommer, Harry Callahan and Harold Jones (75:001, 75:002).
Frederick Sommer (Lecture/Discussion), November 26, 1975

Touching on broad areas of Sommer's interests; question/answer and discussion session leads to long tangential reflections that touch pointedly on all aspects of photography and art (75:010, 75:011).

- Ansel Adams Workshop (Panel)*, November 27, 1975
 Participants: Ansel Adams, Jack Welpott, Robert Heinecken, Judy Dater, Minor White, Norman Locks and Frederick Sommer—in which Sommer gives a brief demonstration of skip-reading (75:012, 75:013, 75:014).
Frederick Sommer (Interview), Harold Jones, November 28, 1975
 Documents Sommer's early years (1905–1928) in Northern Europe and Brazil (75:018, 75:019, 75:020).
Emmet Gowin—Discussion of Frederick Sommer, June 1, 1977
 Gowin's reflections and recollections on Sommer's life and work (77:018, 77:019).

THE EXHIBITION

All dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width; an asterisk denotes illustration.

Photographs

All are gelatin silver prints; dimensions refer to image only.

- *1 UNTITLED, NEGATIVE #66 (CHICKEN PARTS) 1939
 9½ x 7½
 Collection Stephen White, Los Angeles
- 2 UNTITLED (CHICKEN) 1939
 9½ x 7½
 Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson
- *3 GLASS 1943¹
 7⅝ x 9⅞
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- *4 ARIZONA LANDSCAPE 1943
 7½ x 9⅞
 Collection Robert B. Menschel, New York
- *5 ARIZONA LANDSCAPE 1943
 7⅝ x 9½
 Collection Aaron Siskind, Providence, Rhode Island
- 6 ARIZONA LANDSCAPE 1945
 7½ x 9½
 Collection Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Spiritus, Newport Beach, California

- *7 HORSE 1945²
7½ x 9½
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Spiritus, Newport Beach, California
- 8 COYOTES 1945
7⁹/₁₆ x 9⁷/₁₆
Collection Barbara Kasten, Inglewood, California
- *9 MAX ERNST 1946
7⁹/₁₆ x 9½
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller
- 10 THE FURIES 1946
9½ x 7⁹/₁₆
Collection Leland Rice, Los Angeles
- 11 GIANT 1946
9⁷/₁₆ x 7½
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- 12 I ADORE YOU 1947
7⁵/₈ x 9½
Grunwald Center For The Graphic Arts, University of California, Los Angeles
- 13 LIVIA 1948
7⁵/₈ x 9½
Collection Robin Grace, Boulder, Colorado
- *14 THE THIEF GREATER THAN HIS LOOT 1948
9¾ x 5
The Art Institute of Chicago lent from a private collection
- 15 MEDALLION 1948
7⁷/₁₆ x 9½
Private collection, New York
- 16 IDÉE ET ORCHIDÉE 1949
9½ x 7⁹/₁₆
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- 17 THE MILKY WAY 1949
7½ x 9⁷/₁₆
The Art Institute of Chicago lent from a private collection
- *18 BEATO SALTADOR ALEGRE 1950
3⁷/₈ x 5¾
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- 19 AURELIA 1950
5⁹/₁₆ x 3⁹/₁₆
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- *20 ALL CHILDREN ARE AMBASSADORS 1950
5⁵/₈ x 3½
Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, University of California, Los Angeles
- 21 CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF THE BLOOD 1950
4¹/₁₆ x 5¹⁹/₃₂
Pomona College, Claremont, California
Gift of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rembrandt Club, 1975
- *22 ONDINE c.1950
7⁹/₁₆ x 9½
Collection Leland Rice, Los Angeles
- *23 SUMARÉ 1951⁴
7⁵/₈ x 9½
Collection Aaron Siskind, Providence, Rhode Island
- *24 YOUNG EXPLORER 1951
8⁷/₁₆ x 4¹/₈
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Emerson Woelffer, Los Angeles
- *25 MOON CULMINATIONS 1951⁵
9⁵/₈ x 7½
Collection Barbara Kasten, Inglewood, California
- 26 FIGHTING CENTAUR 1952
7½ x 9½
The Art Institute of Chicago lent from a private collection
- *27 UNTITLED (PAINT ON CELLOPHANE) 1958
13¼ x 10¹³/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- *28 PARACELSUS (PAINT ON CELLOPHANE) 1959
13⁵/₁₆ x 10³/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 29 LEE NEVIN 1960
10 x 6¾
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Charles Semonsky, Atlanta, Georgia
- 30 CAPITOLINE MUSEUM 1960
11¼ x 7½
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase
- *31 UNTITLED (NUDE STANDING) 1961
13¼ x 8¹¹/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- *32 HADRIAN'S VILLA (SMOKE ON CELLOPHANE) 1961
10³/₈ x 13¼
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 33 UNTITLED (SMOKE ON CELLOPHANE) 1961
10⁷/₈ x 13¼
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 34 UNTITLED (SMOKE ON CELLOPHANE) 1961
10⁷/₁₆ x 13⁵/₁₆
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gifford Phillips, New York and Los Angeles
- 35 THE GOLDEN APPLES (SMOKE ON CELLOPHANE #5) 1961
10½ x 13¼
The Art Institute of Chicago, lent from a private collection.
- 36 UNTITLED (NUDE) 1961
13¼ x 9
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965

- 37 HERACLITUS 1962
13¼ x 10⁵/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 38 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1962
13¼ x 8⁷/₈
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 39 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1962
13¼ x 8⁷/₈
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- *40 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1963
13⁵/₁₆ x 9¹³/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 41 UNTITLED (NUDE) 1963
13⁵/₁₆ x 8¹⁵/₁₆
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- *42 UNTITLED (NUDE) 1963
13⁵/₁₆ x 8¾
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- 43 LEE NEVIN (WITH VIOLIN) 1963
13¾ x 8⁷/₈
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Vernon, Los Angeles
- *44 UNTITLED (SMOKE ON GLASS) 1965
13⁵/₁₆ x 10⁷/₁₆
Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, University of California, Los Angeles
- 45 UNTITLED (NUDE) 1965
13¼ x 8¾
Norton Simon Museum, gift of the artist, 1965
- *46 VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH ST. ANNE AND THE INFANT ST. JOHN 1966
9¼ x 7
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Spiritus, Newport Beach, California
- *47 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1967
13 x 10
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Spiritus, Newport Beach, California
- *48 DURER VARIATION (HORIZONTAL) 1966⁶
7⁷/₁₆ x 9³/₈
Private collection, New York
- *49 DURER VARIATION (VERTICAL) 1966⁶
9½ x 7½
Collection Edward M. Strauss, Englewood, Colorado
- 50 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1971
9½ x 7½
Private collection, Los Angeles
- 51 UTAH 1973
7⁵/₈ x 9½
Private collection, Ann Arbor, Michigan

- *52 UNTITLED (COLLAGE) 1977
9½ x 7⁵/₈
Collection Leland Rice, Los Angeles
- *53 UNTITLED (CUT PAPER) 1977
9½ x 7½
Courtesy Lunn Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Drawings and Musical Scores

All courtesy of the artist.

- 54 UNTITLED 1946
White glue color pen drawing on black paper⁷
12 x 18½
- 55 UNTITLED 1948
Glue color brush drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 56 UNTITLED 1950
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 57 UNTITLED 1950
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 58 UNTITLED 1951
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 59 UNTITLED 1951
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 60 UNTITLED 1952
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 61 UNTITLED 1952
Black india ink pen drawing on white paper
12 x 18½
- 62 UNTITLED 1952
Black india ink pen drawing on white paper
12 x 18½
- 63 UNTITLED 1952
Black india ink pen drawing on white paper
12 x 18½
- 64 UNTITLED 1953
Glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- *65 UNTITLED 1954
Glue color pen and brush drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 66 MUSICAL SCORE 1954
Glue color pen on black paper
12 x 9¼
- *67 MUSICAL SCORE 1954
Glue color pen on black paper
12 x 9¼

- 68 UNTITLED 1955
White glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- *69 UNTITLED 1955
White glue color pen drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 70 UNTITLED 1955
Glue color brush drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- *71 UNTITLED 1955
Glue color brush drawing on black paper
12 x 18½
- 72 MUSICAL SCORE 1962
Black india ink pen on white paper
12¼ x 9¾
- *73 MUSICAL SCORE 1963
Black india ink pen on white paper
12½ x 9¼
- 74 MUSICAL SCORE 1964
Black india ink pen on white paper
12½ x 9½
- 75 MUSICAL SCORE 1967
Pencil on white paper
12¾ x 9¾

Notes

¹Previous title *Broken Glass*. the artist, personal communication, October-November, 1979.

²Previous title *Rotted Horse*. the artist, personal communication, October-November, 1979.

³Previous dating of this work, 1947, is in error. Personal communication with the artist, October-November, 1979.


⁴Reproduced upside-down in *Aperture*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1956, p. 113.

⁵Previous dating of this work, 1950, is in error. The artist, personal communication, October-November, 1979.

⁶*Durer Variation #1* now designated (HORIZONTAL); *Durer Variation #2* now designated (VERTICAL), at the request of the artist, personal communication, October-November, 1979.

⁷Mixture of pigment and glue.





Photography by George Stimson, Los Angeles with the exception of numbers 3, 9 and 18 courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; 65, 67 and 71 by Clem Fiori, Blawenburg, New Jersey; 69 and 73 by Thomas Carabasi, assistant to Frederick Sommer.

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